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Pattern of conferences

Results of the review of entitlements carried out by subsidiary bodies that have not fully utilized their meeting entitlements, including the duration of their sessions; review problems and factors involved in bodies whose utilization factor was below the benchmark figure for at least three sessions

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. In paragraph 10 of its resolution 51/211 A of 18 December 1996, the General Assembly requested the bodies that had not fully utilized their meeting entitlements, including the duration of their sessions, to review their meeting entitlements and to report the results of their review to the General Assembly through the Committee on Conferences. The report contained in section II below is submitted in response to that request. It was prepared on the basis of the written replies received from 16 of the 23 bodies queried.

2. In paragraph 12 of the aforementioned resolution, the General Assembly reiterated its request to the Committee, in consultation with the organs concerned, to examine the cases where the utilization factor was lower than the established benchmark figure for at least three sessions, with a view to reporting on problems and factors that had given rise to such a situation, and to make appropriate recommendations in order to achieve the optimum utilization of conference-servicing resources. Moreover, in paragraph 46 of its 1996 report to the General Assembly,[1] the Committee on Conferences requested its Chairman to continue to consult on its behalf with the chairmen of bodies that had consistently utilized less than the applicable benchmark figure of their allocated resources for the past three sessions, with a view to making appropriate recommendations in order to achieve the optimum utilization of conference-servicing resources. The report contained in section III below, which is submitted in response to those requests, was prepared on the basis of written replies received from, and consultations with, three of the four bodies in question. The outcome of the consultations with the Chairman of the Committee on Information will be contained in an addendum.

* A/52/50.

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II. Review of subsidiary bodies that have not fully utilized their meeting entitlements, including the duration of their sessions

A. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

3. In the view of the Trade and Development Board of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the statistics for 1995 do not completely reflect that body's situation. There was a particular problem in adjusting the final statistics, as they were based on forecasted demands rather than on actual resources utilized. That situation has now been rectified, and since the session of the Board in October 1996, and in follow-up to the reform and restructuring of UNCTAD and its intergovernmental machinery at the ninth session, in Midrand, major changes have occurred.

4. First, a point has been made, at consultations of the President of the Trade and Development Board and at official meetings, to draw the attention of delegations to the decisions of the Committee on Conferences and the Trade and Development Board, as well as to the importance of the efficient use of resources.

5. Secondly, the Secretary-General of UNCTAD has taken an active interest in the efficient conduct of the intergovernmental process. He has communicated to all States members of UNCTAD detailed observations and proposals on how to meet the challenge of improving its intergovernmental machinery.

6. Thirdly, the number of UNCTAD meetings has been cut by virtually 50 per cent, and the duration of the meetings has been reduced. In addition, parallel meetings are being avoided, which puts the secretariat in a better position to forecast demands for meetings and at the same time reduce the resources required to the very minimum. In fact, one of the major problems contributing to the underutilization of resources had been the need to ensure flexibility in order to have resources available should meetings or negotiations continue beyond the forecasted time or dates. That need has now been totally eliminated by the excellent coordination and communication that has developed between the Board secretariat and the Conference Services Division at the United Nations Office at Geneva, which has developed a new methodology for tailoring services to actual requirements. In the view of the Board, this spirit of cooperation and coordination between the two secretariats has resulted in a marked improvement in the use of resources.

7. With regard to the matter of early ending, which is treated as underutilization, the nature of the work of UNCTAD, particularly sensitive negotiations and discussions, should allow presiding officers to close meetings as soon as consensus has been reached, and thus avoid breakdowns or intractable debates.

8. Lastly, the President of the Trade and Development Board will continue to draw the attention of the Board and of delegations to the relevant General Assembly resolutions and decisions on measures to improve the utilization of resources.

B. Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

9. The schedule of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions is determined by the requirements of the Fifth Committee and the other intergovernmental bodies to which it reports. For example, the Advisory Committee recently instituted a winter session (February/March) as part of the budgetary cycle for the consideration of the financing of peacekeeping operations approved by the General Assembly in its resolution 49/233 of 23 December 1994. The Advisory Committee's agenda is very heavy, especially in view of the recent developments in peacekeeping, the financial crisis and various proposals for reform. In its view, the Advisory Committee utilizes conference services as efficiently as possible. In this connection, it reports that all its meetings start on time. Sometimes meetings end early for a variety of reasons. However, in the view of the Advisory Committee, the fact that a meeting has adjourned early, because, for example, agreement has been reached speedily, does not mean that conference services are being underutilized. If it is necessary to cancel a meeting, care is taken whenever possible to ensure that sufficient notice is given to Conference Services.

10. The members of the Advisory Committee have shown great flexibility, understanding and cooperation as regards both interpretation and translation services. Meetings are often held, without prejudice to the rights of the members to full language services, with less than the full complement of interpreters and with documentation in advance form and in English only.

C. Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations

11. In response to the need to enhance the efficient use of conference services, the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations introduced a number of measures in 1996. For example, the Bureau established, well in advance of the Special Committee's 1996 Informal Working Group, rather firm limits on the number of sessions allocated for the general debate.

12. In addition, the working methods of the Informal Working Group were changed. Instead of initiating drafting discussions on a myriad of issues, the debate in 1996 began on the basis of a draft that had, to the extent possible, already rationalized the proposals made by the delegations during the general debate.

13. The new approaches have proved to be fruitful. In 1995 it was necessary to cancel nearly one third of the 38 planned meetings. In 1996, by introducing the aforementioned measures, the number of cancelled meetings was reduced to less than a quarter of the 36 scheduled meetings. Moreover, in 1995 the Special Committee's utilization factor was 54 per cent, whereas at the last meeting of the Special Committee, that figure was increased to 61 per cent. The Special Committee will strive to increase its efficiency further during its 1997 session.

D. Committee on Information

14. During its eighteenth session, held from 6 to 17 May 1996, the Committee on Information held nine formal meetings, with a total of 60 speakers, one briefing session with the Department of Public Information with 49 participants, three meetings of the Group of 77, and three consultations on the draft resolution. In addition, three requests for conference services were cancelled prior to the opening session of the Committee.

15. For its nineteenth session, in 1997, the Committee is planning five plenary meetings and one meeting of consultations (in a smaller conference room), between 13 and 19 May, two meetings of larger regional groups and a closing plenary meeting during the September segment of the session.

E. Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

16. The Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has made a considerable effort to reduce its demands on Conference Services. For example, as of this year, the Spanish-speaking member of the Working Group has, on an exceptional basis, agreed to work in English. Therefore, the Working Group no longer requires English/Spanish interpretation on a full-time basis, but only when non-English-speaking Governments or non-governmental organizations request to meet with the Working Group. The Working Group has also considerably reduced its requests for pre-, in- and post-session translation, as well as reduced the length of its annual report from 180 pages in 1993 to 117 in 1996. In addition, in compliance with the appeal made in 1995 for a reduction in the length of meetings due to be held before the end of the year, the Working Group agreed to reduce the length of its session in November 1995 by three days.

17. During its sessions, however, the Working Group requires time for informal consultations with Governments and witnesses, which frequently take place prior to the opening of the morning or afternoon meeting. As such consultations are often unforeseeable, and depend not only on the Working Group, but also on its interlocutors, they do, on occasion, delay the start of a meeting. Nevertheless, all efforts will continue to be made to ensure efficient utilization of conference services.

F. Statistical Commission

18. In its view, the Statistical Commission has had very high utilization of the conference services provided to it. Until recently, the Commission's sessions were scheduled for eight days, but in a review of its own functioning, it reduced the sessions to five days on an experimental basis. In addition, the Commission approves the organization of its session, which includes a suggested number of hours to be allocated to each agenda item so as to ensure successful completion of the agenda. Members are encouraged to limit the length of their interventions and to avoid providing technical details of national practices and experiences in their interventions. The Commission will continue to conduct its sessions along the lines referred to, and request only the amount of conference services estimated to be necessary to cover adequately the agenda that it recommends to the Economic and Social Council.

G. Commission on Narcotic Drugs

19. The Commission on Narcotic Drugs held reconvened sessions in 1993 and 1995 to examine budgetary matters. In both instances, conference services were forecast for four meetings (two each day), although it was intended that the morning of the second day would, in fact, be used for informal consultations among interested delegations while the Secretariat was finalizing the draft report for presentation on the afternoon of the second day. That arrangement led to an automatic loss of 25 per cent of forecast conference services, resulting in utilization of less than 80 per cent of resources, although the Commission at its regular sessions has always had utilization well in excess of 80 per cent.

20. In order to avoid built-in underutilization, future reconvened sessions will be forecast at three meetings rather than four. It should be noted that Conference Services was always aware that interpretation would not be required on the morning of the second day, and could be redeployed to other meetings.

H. United Nations Children's Fund – Executive Board

21. In its endeavour to comply fully with the provisions of General Assembly resolutions on improved utilization of conference-servicing resources, the Executive Board of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has taken the following measures:

(a) Spare no effort to start all meetings on time;

(b) Improve time management during sessions, for example, by limiting interventions to five minutes, as measured by an electronic timer. All Executive Board members have demonstrated their genuine will to adhere to time limits;

(c) Plan utilization of time allocated for sessions more effectively. Issues requiring further time for discussion could be tabled for further consultations. Similarly, it was decided that time saved on the planned agenda could be used for informal consultations, thus making it unnecessary to convene additional informal sessions;

(d) Plan meetings more effectively. An annual work plan for all upcoming meetings in the following year is drawn up during the third regular session of the Executive Board. The requirements in terms of time are based on the issues and documents to be discussed.

I. United Nations Development Programme/United Nations Population Fund – Executive Board

22. The Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme/United Nations Population Fund (UNDP/UNFPA) has made considerable progress in reducing late starting and early ending of meetings. Efforts to ensure punctuality and full utilization of conference-servicing resources were continued by the Executive Board in 1997.

J. United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation

23. The United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation generally requires two conference rooms for parallel sessions during its annual meetings. As it was foreseen that some discussions would probably take place in combined session, and as most of the delegates were highly proficient in English, arrangements were made for interpretation in one conference room only. In addition, by agreement, documentation was issued in English only. Considerable savings in conference-servicing resources were thus made. The aforementioned practices will continue to be applied.

K. Commission on Population and Development

24. The twenty-ninth session of the Commission on Population and Development was the first meeting of the Commission following the International Conference on Population and Development, held at Cairo in September 1994. The Commission met to discuss its revitalization, terms of reference, duration of meetings, secretariat support, management, inter-agency coordination and resource base, the work programme and proposed agenda and documentation for the following five years.

25. During the eight days the Commission was in session, 10 formal meetings and five informal meetings were held. The Commission met in more informal sessions than had been anticipated owing to the nature of the resolutions, a factor that could not have been foreseen prior to the convening of the International Conference. In the view of the Commission, the informal sessions were successful to the point that it was able to conclude its session one-half day earlier than anticipated. In addition, because of the

importance of the twenty-ninth session, there were numerous meetings among the Commission members and Secretariat staff. The Bureau of the Commission met daily, and sometimes twice a day, to finalize the report and draft resolutions and decisions. The Commission decided that, beginning in 1996, instead of meeting biennially for eight days, it should meet annually for five days.

L. Committee on the Rights of the Child

26. In a spirit of understanding for the current financial constraints experienced by the Organization, the Committee on the Rights of the Child agreed to take a number of cost-saving measures, including dispensing with the translation of its documents and with summary records whenever possible.

27. However, in view of the nature of its activities, based essentially on dialogue with States parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and monitoring the implementation of the Convention in those States, the Committee needs to interact with a wide range of partners involved in protecting and promoting the rights of the child at the national and international levels, including Governments, United Nations bodies, specialized agencies and other competent bodies. Considering the need to organize meetings with such a variety of entities, a certain amount of flexibility is required, which sometimes might regrettably lead to the cancellation of official meetings or to other readjustments that result in underutilization of resources planned. In its view, in spite of those constraints, the Committee has striven to limit such cases to a minimum.

M. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – Executive Committee

28. In 1995 the Executive Committee of the programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees cancelled two meetings and lost the equivalent of one meeting owing to late starting. Those factors account for its low utilization that year.

29. In the view of the Executive Committee, early ending is a complex matter, as in some cases it may be a sign of efficiency. The early closure of Executive Committee meetings has often related to portions of conference-servicing time reserved for the adoption of reports. Such meetings are susceptible to early ending if the report enjoys an easy passage. Moreover, in a session that lasts 4.5 working days only, they inevitably represent a higher percentage of total meeting time. It should be noted that the length of the Executive Committee plenary session has been shortened from 10 days to 4.5 working days in recent years, a measure which, in itself, has resulted in considerable savings under the conference-servicing budget.

30. The concern expressed by the Committee on Conferences was brought to the attention of the Standing Committee at its meeting in April/May 1997. It was agreed that every effort would be made to improve the performance of both the Executive Committee and its Standing Committee, notably in respect of late starting, and that the question of underutilization of conference-servicing resources would be kept under review by the Standing Committee.

III. Review of the problems and factors involved in bodies whose utilization factor was below the benchmark figure for at least three sessions

31. As part of the consultations referred to in paragraph 2 above, the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences met with the Chairmen of the Special Committee on the Charter of the United Nations and on the Strengthening of the Role of the Organization and the Commission on the Status of Women, and with the President of the Economic and Social Council. The following report focuses on the outcome of the consultations. Consultations have yet to be held with the Chairman of the Committee on Information.

A. Special Committee on the Charter of the United Nations and on the Strengthening of the Role of the Organization

32. On 19 May 1997, the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences met with the Chairman of the Special Committee on the Charter of the United Nations and on the Strengthening of the Role of the Organization. The Chairman of the Special Committee stated that, in an effort to utilize conference-servicing resources more efficiently, that body had reduced the duration of its session from the initial entitlement of four weeks to three weeks, and beginning in 1995, the session was shortened again to two weeks. Any decision to reduce the session further was inextricably linked to the role and mandate given to the Special Committee in future. Numerous factors were involved in that regard. Indeed, at some times the body's mandate was more precise

than at others, and certain issues were more ripe for consideration than others at one time or another.

33. In response to suggestions for strengthening utilization, the Chairman of the Special Committee informed the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences that, while pre-sessional informal consultations were held with a view to establishing a timetable for consideration of items on the agenda of the Special Committee and to improving that body's organization of work, it was nonetheless not possible to foresee all aspects of the debate or its outcome. In addition, because of the nature of the Special Committee's work, delegations required special instructions from their Governments, a fact that frequently caused delays and cancellations. Moreover, in view of the brief duration of the session, it was difficult to predict very far in advance when it would be necessary to cancel meetings.

34. In any event, it should be borne in mind that the progress made by any body should not be assessed in terms of uncancelled meetings, and the cooperation of delegations with the Bureau and the Secretariat was essential in order to improve utilization of conference-servicing resources.

B. Economic and Social Council

35. Consultations between the President of the Economic and Social Council and the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences were held on 22 May 1997. The various factors involved in computing the utilization statistics were clarified, and suggestions for improving utilization of conference-servicing resources were made.

36. One of the principal factors contributing to underutilization has been overestimation of meetings needed, in particular parallel meetings, which are an essential feature of the Council's work. The General Assembly has taken the decision to reduce the sessions of the Council from five weeks to four weeks, which is expected to improve planning of parallel meetings, thereby reducing cancellations. In addition, the President of the Council assured the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences that he would spare no effort to make members aware of the important part they played, for example, in terms of punctuality, in ensuring efficient and effective utilization of conference-servicing resources.

C. Commission on the Status of Women

37. The Chairman of the Committee on Conferences held consultations with the Chairman of the Commission on the Status of Women on 29 May 1997. While the Commission has demonstrated a clear trend towards improvement in its utilization of conference-servicing resources since 1994, the major factor responsible for underutilization - late starting of meetings - appeared to be worsening.

38. The Chairman of the Commission informed the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences that following the Fourth World Conference on Women, held at Beijing in 1995, the Commission had lost considerable time in its effort to identify a chairperson, which was a problem that had since been solved. In addition, the Commission had held numerous consultations with a view to improving its methods of work so as to strengthen the utilization of conference-servicing resources. In that regard, the Commission sought to improve inter-sessional planning and to have a detailed perspective of its work. Moreover, with a view to facilitating the conduct of its work, the Commission had taken the decision to reflect the outcome of its deliberations in agreed conclusions rather than in resolutions.

39. The Commission had taken other steps to improve utilization, as well. A time limit for speakers had been established, and an electronic signalling device was in place to enforce the rule. Moreover, the general debate had been reduced considerably. Further efforts would focus on ensuring that the panellists involved in panel sessions were aware of the ways and means to improve utilization of conference-servicing resources, waiving the quorum requirement so that meetings could begin on time and suspending meetings upon opening them in order to enable the Group of 77 to hold consultations, in which case the Commission would not be penalized for starting late.

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-first Session, Supplement No. 32* (A/51/32 and Corr.1 and Add.1).